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ABSTRACT

Serious concerns are being raised by the poor and uneducated underclass in the United States. Four main points are given which expand upon these concerns. (1) The affluent and middle class white U.S. population does not have enough interest and commitment to the poor and undereducated population to pay the price it will take to educate the U.S. underclass. The people do not believe they have the resources to spend in this way, and politicians are unable to change their minds. (2) The nature of the problem of educating the U.S. underclass is much more complex and multifaceted than most citizens are willing to admit. Higher academic standards, better pay for teachers, and other governor-led, state-level educational reforms will help, but will be inadequate. (3) The problem is not going to be solved by recruiting more and better minority group members to teaching. There are two reasons for this: the educational community does not have the means to recruit enough good minority teachers; and recruiting minority teachers is not sufficient to solve the problem. Rising academic standards, more verbal-based tests, five and six years of preparation, and low financial attraction discourage prospective minority teachers. (4) Schools and teaching are not strong enough to succeed with the task of educating the U.S. underclass in the near future. A five-part agenda for social studies educators is proposed which advocates the need to give to preservice and inservice social studies teachers the facts about poverty in the United States and to rekindle the commitment to equality and justice for everyone; the need to teach that social problems hurt all; the need to teach about economic and racial subgroups in the United States and about multicultural understanding; the need to teach that solving tough problems takes time and commitment; and the need to adjust the perspectives and priorities of social studies educators. (APG)

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Social Studies Teacher Education in an Era of "Haves" and "Have Nots"

A Paper Presented at the
Teacher Education SIG Meeting

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National Council for the Social Studies

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New York, New York

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

A few days ago, a 22 member commission headed by former Secretary of Education Terrell H. Bell issued a report entitled "To Secure the Blessings of Liberty." The report was prepared for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. According to one news release, the commission expressed serious concern about the role of school and collegiate education in the education of the "American underclass."

Among its points were the following,

> "With a high school dropout rate ranging from 25% to 50% and with almost 10% of our total population functionally illiterate, who can deny that we have a massive population of undereducated people."
>
> "Public officials who propose budget reduction in education at a time when the republic is handicapped by the burden of an undereducated populace are unthinkingly abetting an act of national suicide. Their priorities are wrong."
>
> "Tragically for the American people, the federal student financial aid program today is on the chopping block in Washington."

The report also said that the real value of federal aid has fallen 25% since President Reagan took office in 1981.[1]

A few days earlier, Rep. Augustus Hawkins (D-Florida) issued a report "Children in America: A Strategy for the 100th Congress." The report calls for expanding compensatory education programs for disadvantaged elementary and secondary school children as part of a broader effort to reduce illiteracy and unemployment among the poor. It said that as many as 60 million Americans may not have the reading and writing skills necessary to function effectively in

society. It also pointed to high drop out rates in school and drug problems among children and youth.[2]

The report proposed significant increases in funding for Head Start programs and Supplemental Food Programs for Women, Infants and Children. At the same time it acknowledged funding problems in Washington and the lack of support for increasing money for these types of efforts.[3]

A little more than two months ago, Ernest L. Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, provided an overview of his report on early-childhood education, The Early Years. He said that American schools must devote attention to the problems of the nation's underclass or risk the creation of an "educational third world" in our cities. He said while "advantaged" schools are getting better, those of the cities are deeply troubled. He raised what I believe to be a significant question, a question that I believe might have a terribly depressing answer: "Will Americans continue to believe in education for all children, or will it sort out schooling between the winners and the losers?"[4]

Boyer continued, "Our first obligation is to recognize that poverty and schooling are connected." He said troubled city schools are impacted by "the breakup of the home," community crime, lack of money and the loss of teachers. He said further, "Unless we deepen our commitment, the crisis of urban education will increase. An aging white population will face an increasing minority population in the schools. I fear they will say it's 'their children' not 'our nation'."[5]

I share Boyer's fear. I think what he fears is sure to happen. This is the first of my points. Affluent and middle class white America does not have enough interest and commitment to poor undereducated America to pay the price

it will take to educate the American underclass. The people do not believe they have the resources to spend in this way, and the politicians are not going to be able to change their minds.

I am not saying that political leaders are ignoring the problem or avoiding commitment at this point. They are not. Governors are particular outspoken and concerned. Bill Clinton, Governor of Arkansas, who now chairs both the Education Commission of the States and the National Governors' Association said recently

> "We began our reform initiatives in the name of all our children. It has become clear, however, that we are still not addressing the needs of all children. Even when schools have gotten better, too many children remain unaffected. Too many students move out of grade school without basic skills; too many fall prey to teen-age pregnancy, alcohol, and drug abuse. Too many students are failing, too many are coasting, and too many are dropping out.
>
> What I want to do first and foremost in the coming year as E.C.S. chairman is to focus on what we can do to 'reconnect' those youths who are now disconnected from school, family, the workplace, and the values and skills they need to become productive adults. We simply cannot accept a system that is so unproductive and so inhumane as to let as much as a third, and in some places a majority, of students drop away before receiving their degrees.[6]

The governors as a group, led by my own governor, Lamar Alexander, took up the challenge this summer in the national governors' document Time for

Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education.[7] The document is a governors' agenda for action for the years to come. But, the very comprehensiveness of that report illustrates the magnitude of the problem. My worry is not that we will avoid commitment at the general level, but that we will not be willing or able to pay the price that will be required to make a significant difference.

This brings me to my second point. The nature of the problem of educating the American underclass is much more complex and multifaceted than most of us are willing to admit. More nutrition and Head Start programs as Rep. Hawkins proposes will help, but they will not do nearly enough. Higher academic standards, better pay for teachers, and other governor-led, state-level educational reforms will also help but will be inadequate. The teacher education reform proposals of the Carnegie Task Force and the Holmes Group might too be steps in the right direction, but will be insufficient.

The magnitude of the problem can be approximated by looking at a statement by Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., chancellor of the State University of New York system and chair of the Rockefeller Foundation, in a recent "Commentary" section of Education Week. Although its primary focus is only on black Americans and is not comprehensive in the context of my concerns, it is, I believe, so illustrative of my point that I will quote at length.

> "The fraction of blacks finishing high school increased from 10 percent in 1940 to 70 percent in 1980. Moreover, between 1965 and 1984, black enrollment in colleges and universities nearly quadrupled, by far the largest part of the increase occurring at predominantly white institutions.

And yet, in the most recent years, something has gone very, very wrong in education for black youngsters.

Since 1980, the black high-school completion rate has hovered around 70 percent--much better than a generation before, but still substantially poorer than the 83 percent rate for white youths. In many central cities, the dropout rate soars to 40 percent, 50 percent, and even higher. Dropping out starts among black students as early as the primary grades and extends right through high school. As for those who do graduate, many are academically unprepared as a result of attending classes in which merely keeping order has displaced rigorous instruction.

Some students will have been automatically 'tracked' into vocational rather than college-preparatory programs, regardless of their abilities and aptitudes. Others still will have been programmed to blame themselves for the failures of the educational system and will have come to loathe the very idea of further study.

Why, after having won at such terrible cost the right for our young people to attend school, do we face a black dropout rate that has reached the point of a national educational emergency?

Well, the old vicious cycles have not gone away. Disenfranchisement breeds poverty breeds bad neighborhoods, which in turn breed bad schools and dropouts who cannot get jobs. Unemployment breeds crime, welfare dependency, and

homelessness. Before long, you are right back where you started--only now with yet another generation seared with the permanent brand of oppression, locked into what the sociologists have begun calling the 'hard-core underclass.'

Even so, there is a sense in which this analysis, so familiar and unassailable, is unsatisfying. It is unsatisfying because it fails to explain why, two or three generations ago, blacks somehow managed to advance their educational goals even with the deck stacked much more formidably against them....

Diverse as they are, I have observed that educated blacks from the 20's through the 50's tend to have several things in common psychologically. They have a strong sense of self and heritage. They have tremendous drive and ambition. In a word, they aspire. They are not much interested in all the reasons they are given why a black person has never before accomplished what they want to do. All that matters to them is what it will take for them to do it, now.

How does this contrast with the attitudes currently instilled in so many black youngsters in school?

Through images, representations, the very structure of language, we send an overwhelming signal to black children. And the signal is: 'Excellence is for other folks--not you.'

From the first day of the 1st grade to the moment when the last strains of 'Pomp and Circumstance' fade to silence,

many and perhaps most of our schools and colleges beat the same dreary drum.

Start in kindergarten. Set up 'slow' sections to homogenize the classroom. Pass the 'slow' kids anyway, whether they have learned the material or not. Just make sure they know they are getting by 'because they're black.'

Design 'aptitude tests' and academic tracking for the 'culturally impoverished.'

Hire guidance counselors who benignly steer black youngsters away from college, toward jobs right after high school, or at best toward technical programs leading to jobs with low ceilings of advancement.

Demand dual college-admissions standards--better yet, lobby for a tacit lowering of academic standards for graduation, graduate school, and professional certification.

And so on.

And so on.

And I must ask: Do we think that by these shabby devices we are doing black youngsters a favor?

No. What we are doing is telling them, in a hundred whispered or unspoken ways each day, that we do not believe in their abilities or even their potential.

Is it any wonder, really, that so many of them cannot believe in themselves?

Over the last several years, I have nursed a growing conviction that one of the most urgent needs for black youth

is a broad-based effort to help foster stronger, more competitive, achievement-oriented self-images...."[8]

Wharton goes on to look to the black family as a means to tackle the problem. Well, he might have a point, but I would not let us off the hook. His analysis exposes American society, schools and educators as major parts of the problem. We need to do something to correct the situation, if there is any hope at all.

In the 60's we thought we solved the problem, but instead we ignored it. We passed undereducated students instead of teaching them. We did not help them. We lied to them.

I would extend Wharton's analysis to all aspects of the "have nots" of American society. It applies to all the undereducated--other minorities, teenage parents, their children, rural Americans of all races, mentally retarded students and students with other handicapping conditions, children of the drug culture,, children of undereducated parents, and poor people in a more general sense.

My third main point is more specific. The problem is not going to be solved by recruiting more and better minority group members to teaching. There are two reasons for this. First, we do not have the means to recruit enough good minority teachers. Second, recruiting minority teachers is not sufficient to solve the problem. Reports such as that of the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching As a Profession will have tremendous and probably good impacts on teacher education and teaching in America, but they cannot by themselves produce enough minority teachers to make enough of a difference. In fact, these reports in themselves have stated goals that mitigate against attracting minority group representatives to teaching. When they call for

tougher academic standards for teachers, more verbal-based tests, and five and six years of preparation, they are suggesting raising criteria that are most discriminating against minority teachers as of now. On the other hand, if they propose exceptions to these standards for minority teachers, minority teachers will be noticeably weaker than other teachers.

Financial attractions to teaching that have been mentioned in the reform literature so far simply are not adequate to attract potentially good minority teachers. Who is going to give up $40,000 in industry to teach for $15,000 or $20,000 in an urban, poor high school, with terrible working conditions? College tuition grants of $2,000-$3,000 are not going to make enough of a difference, nor are grants of $10,000 a year for an entire career. By the same token, who is going to teach the urban poor when more affluent suburban schools where the jobs are easier and more rewarding offer them more money?

Even if incentives to prospective teachers were sufficient they would be bucking a trend. The percentage of minority students going to college in recent years is down, not up.[9] The percentage of minority college students who want to be teachers is down, not up. The percentage of minority college students who are the top achieving students in schools with high academic standards is minuscule.'

During the 1970s we made much of the belief that strong, achieving minority role models as teachers would help minority students succeed in school and, thereby, break the non-achieving, poverty cycle. The idea seemed logical and I still want to believe it, but I do not know of any data that support it.

My fourth main point has to do with what we expect of schools and of the reform movement. Schools and teaching are not strong enough to succeed in the

task of educating America's underclass in the near future. The institutions are too weak, and the task is simply too great. The reform movement seeks to make schools better but I doubt if it will be forceful enough or last long enough to succeed in this way. Before there is enough improvement to satisfy those who want better schools for the poor, disillusionment will set in.

One recent writer described the situation this way:

> "The schools are...in the process of being oversold. We are repeating the 1960's, when education was called on to solve many of society's problems. Educators rallied and implemented a variety of programs designed to correct the difficulties. Money was also provided.... But the fact is, the schools failed. They will also fail in the 1980's."[10]

An Agenda for Social Studies Educators

So, what should educators do, especially social studies educators and teacher educators such as us? I have an agenda to suggest--an agenda that is particularly appropriate, I think, for social studies educators and teacher educators, one that is actually in our own self interest as well as appropriate to our missions as teachers of teachers and social educators of children. I admit, however, that the agenda is both general and abstract. In short, we need to recommit ourselves to being better social studies educators, or, maybe, to being better values educators.

1. We need to stress with our preservice and inservice social studies teachers the facts of life about poverty in America. We need to rekindle in them the American commitment to equality and justice for everyone. We need to convince them to continue to sell the American

dream to their students, so that those students and their parents will be more willing to pay the bills for educating the underclass.

2. We need to educate our students and the students of our students about the complexities of these social problems. We need to convince them that everyone has a stake in the problems--that they hurt us all, and that we can solve them only if all of society works together. We must encourage them to participate, to do their part as teachers and citizens.
3. We need to teach about economic and racial subgroups in America and multicultural understanding. We need to convince the next generation of teachers and citizens that eliminating poverty and discrimination are not just responsibilities of the people who are suffering. We must teach them that it is naive to assume that it is people from the ghetto who must educate people from the ghetto. Poverty and discrimination, crime and drugs, alienation and lack of education are societal ills that all of us must address.
4. We need to teach that solving tough problems takes both time and continuous commitment. We must help our students not only realize the nature of the task of educating the underclass but also help them avoid expecting too much too soon and expecting too much from schools. They will need to be patient and persistant, to watch for incremental gains and stay committed.
5. We must also adjust our own perspectives and priorities as social studies educators. We must put aside for at least part of our professional lives some of our internal social studies arguments in order to address these issues. We must realize that there are bigger

issues for social studies educators than scope and sequence, global education vs. law-related education, and if the Madeline Hunter model works for our subject matter. We must devote some of our time and energies to improving the lives of Americans through the schools.

I realize that we usually focus our business as social studies educators more narrowly than I have suggested in this general agenda. I think that is a problem. It is one of the reasons why school children say social studies is irrelevant to their lives.

I think the agenda addresses why many of us became social studies teachers in the first place, especially those of us who started in the 60's. We though we could and should improve society and we believed that schools and social studies classrooms were places where we could do that.

Notes

1. "Panel Pushes for More College-Educated Adults," by Christopher Connell (Associated Press), The Tennessean, November 10, 1986, p. 10-A.
2. "More Education Nutrition Expansion Urged (Associated Press), The Tennessean, November 9, 1986, p. 17-A.
3. Ibid.
4. "Boyer Urges Schools to Focus on Plight of 'At Risk' Youth," by Marleen Nienhies, Education Week, September 10, 1986, p. 1+.
5. Ibid.
6. Bill Clinton, "Schools Must 'Reconnect' Pupils, Cultivate 'Leadership for Change'," Education Week, September 10, 1986, p. 48.
7. "Governors Draft 5-Year Blueprint to Press Reform," by Lynn Olson, Education Week, September 10, 1986, p. 1+.
8. Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., "'Demanding Families' and Black Achievement," Education Week, October 29, 1986, p. 24.
9. For example, see "Minority Access An 'Unresolved Problem' on Campus, Study Says," by Robert Rothman, Education Week, September 17, 1986, p. 7.
10. Philip E. Altbach, "Underfunded and 'Oversold'," Education Week, October 15, 1968.